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Top of the class:  
How should we be  
judging our schools?

**adoptionuk**  
for every adoptive family

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# INTRODUCTION

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Is it possible to strive for high academic achievement while still giving a school's most vulnerable students an equal chance to succeed?

This is a question that confronts teachers in schools across the whole of the UK, every day of the teaching year.

Any school can achieve stellar exam results with children who are academically-able, have stable home lives and present few challenges in the classroom. But excellence means more than exam results. It means achieving great outcomes for all students, including the most vulnerable. An excellent school generates young people who are reaching their individual potential, academically, socially and emotionally, who are mentally healthy and excited about their futures. No school should be judged outstanding unless it is outstanding for all its students. But in recent years, schools' academic results have hugely dominated the way they are judged.

In England the question has been brought into sharp focus by the publication of new draft guidelines for school inspections by the school regulator, OFSTED. OFSTED's rhetoric calls for a re-balancing between exam results and quality of education, and bold moves have already been made in this direction elsewhere in the UK. This is potentially very good news, especially for the most vulnerable students. It presents an opportunity to invest in the kinds of school approaches that will benefit all children, not just the most able and stable. But it remains to be seen whether the education establishment in England and the government really are ready to move beyond the damaging obsession with academic results that is putting so many children at a disadvantage.

This report is part of Adoption UK's Equal Chance campaign, which seeks to level the playing field for adopted children and other traumatised children who have had a terrible start in life, to ensure that schools give them an equal chance of a bright future.

The way schools are judged by inspectors largely determines the way they are run. This report looks at the current ideological landscape in education and asks the question: In order to ensure an equal chance for all children, how should we be judging our schools?

## SUPPORTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

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Care-experienced children, including those who have been adopted, are among the most vulnerable of all school children. Most have suffered serious abuse or neglect. Education is the number one concern for adoptive families, because many of their children are struggling to survive in school, let alone thrive. These children are significantly more likely than their peers to be excluded from school<sup>1</sup>, and to leave school with no qualifications<sup>2</sup>. By the age of 21, four in ten care leavers are not in education, employment or training<sup>3</sup>. It is vital that our education system gives these children, who have not had an equal start in life, an equal chance at school.

However, care-experienced children, though particularly vulnerable, are just the tip of the iceberg. Up to 60% of children in every classroom are dealing with the impact of some sort of trauma. Bereavement, family breakdown, domestic violence, incarceration of a parent and drug and alcohol abuse in the family all affect a child's ability to learn. Some are living with the grinding daily despair of poverty. Almost four in five teachers have encountered children experiencing significant mental health problems in the past year, according to a recent survey by mental health charity Stem4.

The impacts of trauma are not limited to learning delay, which is incredibly common. They can also include speech, language and communication difficulties, sensory processing difficulties, attachment disorders, foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, physical disabilities, anxiety and depression, and executive functioning difficulties. Strategies which work well enough for many children may prove utterly ineffective in the face of such challenges.

# THE IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

Educators have no option but to work within the frameworks imposed on them by their governments and inspection regimes, often finding themselves at the mercy of political and ideological drivers.

In England, there have been a number of recent government-led initiatives seeking to address some worrying trends in education. A review of the increasing number of school exclusions is being led by Edward Timpson CBE. There is a new pilot project to provide expert mental health support in school. The roles of designated teachers in schools have been extended to include adopted children as well looked after children, to address the false assumption that adoption wipes the slate clean in terms of the trauma these children experience before they are adopted.

However, over the last decade the environment for those who support vulnerable children in school has been increasingly challenging. In 2010, concerned that schools may be gaming league tables by entering students for so-called 'softer subjects', Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education in England, announced a return to 'traditional values'. The benchmark for underperforming schools was raised and head teachers of struggling schools were told they would risk losing their jobs.

In some schools, a return to 'traditional values' has been interpreted as a move towards zero tolerance and no excuses behaviour policies. While the Department for Education Behaviour and Discipline in Schools guidance (2016) reminds schools that punishments must be proportionate and take into account a child's age and any special educational needs or disability that they may have, the strong emphasis on rewards and punishments as a way of enforcing desired behaviour, and lack of acknowledgement of behaviour as communication leaves schools little room for manoeuvre when supporting children for whom those methods are ineffective.

In this environment, and with funding increasingly stretched, it is incredibly tough to find the time and resources to support students who struggle with behaviour and learning. It takes a brave head teacher to invest in children whose needs are complex and who seem unlikely to get good exam results, when schools are increasingly judged on their league table positions and under-performing schools risk replacement of their leadership and forced academisation.

However, in some parts of the UK, supporting traumatised students at schools is the subject of some really bold and fresh thinking.

In Scotland, the 'ACE-aware' movement is sweeping through schools, bringing with it new research and evidence about the impacts of adverse childhood experiences and the very best approaches that can be adopted by educators to overcome them. The Standards for Registration of the General Teaching Council for Scotland require teachers to "recognise when a learner's behaviour may signify distress, requiring the need for further support". An understanding of the drivers of challenging behaviour and the underlying causes of poor achievement is beginning to inform policies, protocols, strategies and interventions.

*"I feel that the ACE aware movement sweeping across Scotland just now will go a long way in changing the way care experienced learners are supported in our schools."*

**Additional Support Needs teacher, Scotland**

The new Curriculum for Wales places health and wellbeing at the heart of education, as one of the six core Areas of Learning and Experience. The nation of Wales has acted in recognition of the ample research that shows us that when children feel safe, nurtured and included, their attainment improves.

*"Relationships are key to make sure children feel 'safe' in their environment."*

**Primary school senior leader, Wales**

In Northern Ireland, experiences formed during the crucible of The Troubles are now forming the basis for a movement towards shared and trauma-informed education that is gaining attention and plaudits from an international audience. Even the language of the education establishment is thoughtful and forward thinking. The most recent Chief Inspector's report prioritises the need for children to be physically and mentally healthy, for them to be able to 'live and learn in safety and stability', and for them to learn to build good relationships and life skills. The inspector notes: 'Good results can mask underachievement in schools, with an intake of more able pupils, but where the curriculum design may be traditional and lacking in flexibility.'

# THE NEW OFSTED FRAMEWORK

OFSTED is calling this new framework an 'evolutionary shift' in the way schools are assessed. Head of OFSTED Amanda Spielman has said: '...we all know that too much weight placed on performance measures alone can lead to a degree of distortion, both in what is taught and not taught, and in other aspects of how a provider is managed. We also know that those who come to education with a disadvantage of any kind are more likely to be directly affected when these distortions happen.'

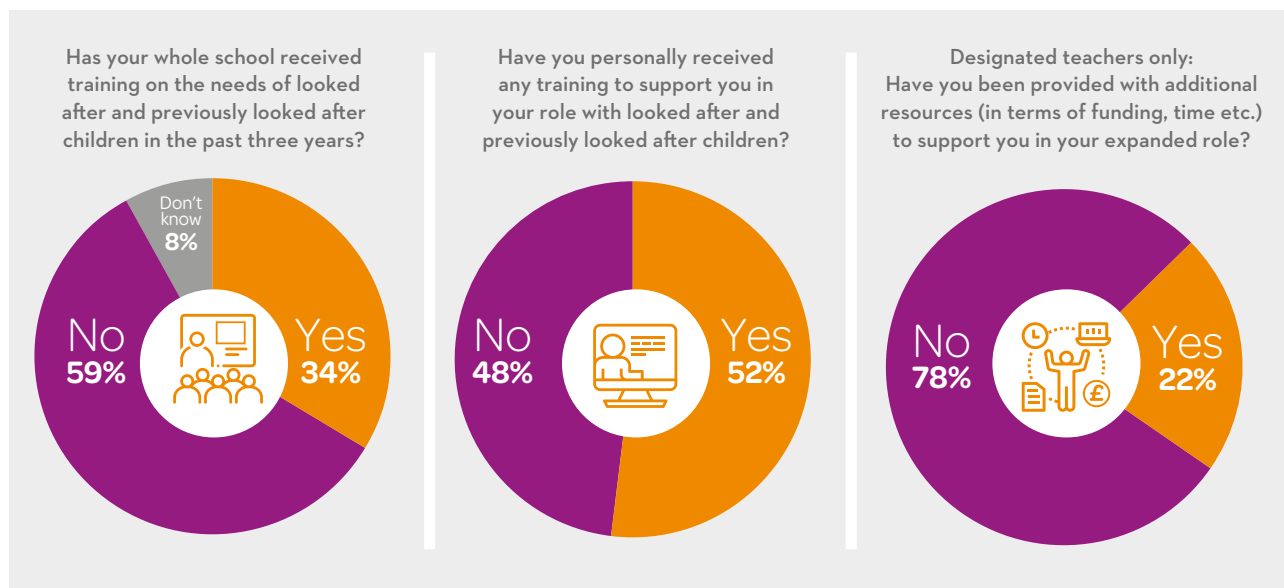
The rhetoric is promising. The guidelines instruct schools to '...give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life.' There is an insistence that the practice of 'off-rolling' – informally excluding troublesome students – must end. There is a new 'quality of education' judgement that assesses what is taught and how it is taught, not just the exam results.

The new framework is clearly an opportunity to help schools move towards a whole-school approach that benefits all children. However there are also some worrying aspects to the guidelines, including:

- The old 'Behaviour and Welfare' judgement has been renamed 'Behaviour and Attitudes'. Behaviour and welfare are inextricably linked, and when we ignore the causes of children's distress in favour of a punitive focus on the symptoms of it, we risk consigning our most vulnerable young people to an educational wasteland.
- The entire list of specific cohorts that require special attention has been removed. The term 'disadvantage' is used as a catch-all for any vulnerable student. Disadvantage is usually assumed to mean economic disadvantage rather than emotional and learning disadvantage. There is a grave risk that pupils dealing with trauma, including adopted children, will lose visibility.
- Though there is reference to ending off-rolling, there is nothing specific about tackling rising exclusions.
- There is no reference to the importance of equipping staff to understand and apply an understanding of trauma in the classroom, despite the fact that around half their pupils are likely to face some barriers to learning because of their experience of trauma.

## THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

It is those who spend their days in the classroom who have the most informed view of the impact of trauma on their students' learning and behaviour. At the end of 2018 Adoption UK surveyed more than 300 educators around the UK who work daily with care-experienced children and young people. In England we asked Designated Teachers. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where DTs do not exist, we questioned all teachers and teaching assistants who work regularly with looked after and previously looked after children. Across the UK, what we heard loud and clear was that teachers want the very best for all of their students. Many are passionate advocates for the right of every child to an education. But they also told us that they are struggling.





Nearly 60% of respondents told us that there has been no relevant training on the needs of children who have experienced trauma in their school in the past three years. More than half said that they themselves had received no training, despite working regularly with vulnerable children and young people. These findings are corroborated by the report 'Teachers Who Care'<sup>4</sup> by Become, which found that almost nine out of ten teachers received no training about looked after children before they qualified.

In England, a shocking eight out of ten designated teachers who responded to our survey have received no additional resources, either in terms of funding or time, to help them fulfil their newly-expanded role. Hampered by lack of training and resources, there is only so much an individual teacher can do in the classroom, however much they care.

"I love my job. I am passionate about it, but my looked after and previously looked after children take up so much time (I also have a whole class of 32) which is unappreciated by the governors and other staff who have no understanding of the issues involved due to lack of training and awareness."

**Designated Teacher, England**

Overwhelmingly, teachers told us that they need training, time, resources and support from senior leaders and other education professionals in order to help them to excel in their work. When this does not happen, teachers become frustrated, children are left behind, and attainment suffers.

"There are many good teachers and assistants who try their best to meet the needs of children from a care background but a lack of interest and support from senior management and little or no communication with social workers make this a most difficult task."

**Primary school class teacher, Northern Ireland**

If we are serious about closing the gap caused by disadvantage, raising attainment, and providing an education system that works for all of our children, then the concerns of those who deliver that education every day must be acknowledged and acted upon.

# A DIFFERENT WAY

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It is no bad thing for schools to strive for academic excellence. Children who have experienced loss, trauma, abuse and neglect deserve a chance to succeed and excel just like any other child, and low expectations can be a millstone around the necks of some students. Such children do not need excuses, but they do need to have the devastating and ongoing impact of their life experiences taken into account.

Many educators were educated in a system that relies on behaviourist rewards and consequences methods to achieve results, have been trained as teachers in the same methods, where school performance is judged on a very narrow set of criteria, and are working in an ideological landscape that cannot see a different way.

Yet we know more now than we have ever known before about child development, the neuroscience of adversity and the biology of trauma. We know that there is a different way, already embraced by hundreds of schools around the UK. These pioneering schools are doing an outstanding job of educating their most vulnerable students, as well as their most able and settled children. But often these schools are not being judged 'outstanding' or considered excellent, because they are not only chasing academic achievement.

As the debate about how we judge our schools rages on, Adoption UK has gathered the views of prominent education theorists and practitioners from across the UK on the hallmarks of a high-quality educational environment that enables children who have experienced trauma to succeed, while providing superb provision for all students.

Between them, our contributors have decades of teaching and research experience. They are teachers, authors, academics, special education experts and national leaders in education. They speak from personal passion, from interactions with thousands of other teachers and school leaders, from academic research, and from expertise honed through experience in classrooms across the UK. Among their submissions are ten pointers for creating a trauma-informed school from a Scottish head teacher, a unique perspective on trauma refined in the crucible of decades of conflict in Northern Ireland from a professor at Queen's University Belfast, and an impassioned plea for unconditional positive regard from a leading figure in a multi-academy trust of special schools.

Taken in combination, their message is clear: great schools give every child an equal chance to succeed, including those with the greatest barriers to learning. This should be the starting point for the way we judge our schools.



# MARY BOUSTED

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As Joint General Secretary of the NEU (National Education Union), and former General Secretary of the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers), Mary Bousted represents the voices of more than 450,000 education professionals across the UK. In her speech to the last ATL conference, she said, “I see children and young people whose mental well-being is under threat, and I wonder how far a narrow, academic curriculum and a barrage of high stakes tests are contributing to the increasing mental ill health of our children and young people.” Fresh from recent campaigning against cuts to special educational needs provision, she gives us this perspective on outstanding educational provision for children who have experienced trauma.

## Mary Bousted

Joint General-Secretary of  
The National Education Union

Schools should be the beating heart of a community where all children and young people are welcome and able to benefit from an education which meets their personal needs and academic potential. Schools should be places of liberation, where pupils are able to acquire knowledge of the wider world, and the skills and abilities to successfully make the transition to adulthood. Schools should be places where the talents and interests of pupils are celebrated; where they learn to deal with, and overcome, challenges and difficulties, so that they develop the resilience, born out of confidence, that they have not found everything easy but that they have coped before, and will cope again.

So, schools are places where much more than academic success should be celebrated. Schools are the institutions where children and young people gain their first immersion into lives beyond their immediate families or care givers. Schools inculcate in children and young people the knowledge that they have responsibilities, first as pupils, to their classmates and to their teachers. This first-hand experience of learning and working with classmates is then developed into a more mature, more complex understanding of each individual's role in society, where rights are matched by responsibilities.

But some schools are not the beating heart of their community. In them pupils are valued almost wholly for their academic attainment. Children who have had a tough start in life, for whatever reason, find it more difficult to get into these schools, and if they do, soon find that their personal needs are not being met.

It is not hard to see how this unfortunate situation has developed. Over the past decade schools have been told by government that they must compete with one another for pupils and for funding. Government has initiated any number of measures of school performance, most based on exam results. Those children, whether they have special needs, or are looked after or adopted are more likely to be excluded from schools, or 'off rolled' (which means they stay on the school roll but spend most of their time at home or in the exclusion unit).

Teachers report that their working lives are now so pressured and the school day is so packed with activity, including revision classes, extra classes and meetings, that there is less time to spend with their pupils. This most particularly affects children and young people who need extra support, a little more personal time to talk things through with a trusted adult.

And schools are finding that, stripped of the support of local authorities whose funding for special needs support, or educational psychologists, or family therapists, or speech and language specialists, has been cut to the bone, there is little or no specialist advice available when a pupil needs help.

We have to do much more to support pupils whose lives have been traumatic. They deserve to reach their potential and we, as a society, must do much more to enable them to do so.

# JARLATH O'BRIEN

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Jarlath O'Brien  
Teacher

Behaviour columnist for the *Times Educational Supplement*, and author of *Don't Send Him in Tomorrow* and *Better Behaviour: A Guide for Teachers*, Jarlath O'Brien has built his experience in schools across the education spectrum, including special education. He currently works in London as a teacher for a multi-academy trust. He has been notoriously dismissive of OFSTED, saying that what he holds himself to account for is: "What our students are going to be like when they're adults. That's our intense focus . . . doing everything we can to give them the best possible chance in adult life."

Over the course of 18 years as a teacher I have worked in comprehensive, independent selective and special education. I have worked with children who have gone to Oxford and Cambridge, children who have gone to prison, children who have died due to life-shortening conditions and children who have lived through significant and sustained trauma. I have seen how children who have experienced trauma can thrive in any type of school. And I've learned, sometimes the hard way, how schools can hinder the chances of children who have experienced trauma.

## Unconditional positive regard

For years I significantly underestimated that my attitude to the children who walked into my classroom was a principal determinant in how well they behaved. Great schools, and their teachers within, get this.

A complete and unconditional acceptance of each child for who they are and what they do is the bedrock of any work to support children who have experienced trauma. Without this, children are only accepted under certain conditions that the adults get to decide (conditions that may well be unknown to the child) and this positive regard is withdrawn when the child behaves in ways that breach those conditions. Adults need to start from where the child is and seek to improve from that position rather than resorting to the tired and ineffective punishment escalator.

## A sense of belonging

A positive, inclusive culture in a school can be helped tremendously by a strong sense of belonging. I want all children to feel that they are someone important in their school.

Students who feel a greater sense of belonging tend to be more motivated and engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school<sup>1</sup>. Further, they tend to have higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning, whereas those who feel isolated report greater anxiety, boredom, frustration, and sadness<sup>2</sup>.

This sense of belonging must be built on solid foundations of safety and security, and I don't just mean safety from bullying. Some children will avoid failure at all costs, so we need to ensure they feel safe to give things a go without feeling the deep burn of shame that can accompany failure. My favourite mantra with colleagues just so happens to be: "They need to know we're here to catch them, not catch them out."

## The C Word

We're always told that one of the keys to success with behaviour is consistency. However, a great school recognises that all children are different. The school's actions, decisions and policies allow for this and they act according to their values, not blindly demanding consistency.

### Recognising and meeting unmet needs

Once I settled on the view that negative behaviours are the communication of unmet needs my entire approach to dealing with behaviour changed fundamentally.

This is not to say that children do not possess free will, or that we let them get away with behaving poorly. It means that I regard all behaviour as purposive and work from there.

### Doing well

Aligned to this thinking about unmet needs is the view from Dr Ross Greene that children will do well if they can, and if they're not doing well it is because they lack the necessary skills to be successful at that point – “They lack the skills not to be challenging” as he says<sup>3</sup> I like this way of thinking a lot as it makes sense to me that no one sets out to be unsuccessful, to fail, to potentially embarrass themselves in front of their peers and their teachers.

### Problem-solving

Great schools are alert to the fact that there are two problems that need to be identified and solved – the child's and the adult's. The adult's problem – the child refusing to enter the classroom, say – has an obvious solution which rests entirely with the child. ‘Just do as I ask, and the problem goes away.’ Identifying the child's problem will take more work and is probably only going to be achieved by talking to them. As Joe Bower says, “The child must feel like you care about solving their problem as much as you care about solving your own.”<sup>4</sup>

### Recognise, don't reward

The best schools recognise the progress children make from wherever their own personal starting point is. They don't set up blunt reward systems that dangle inducements– these cheapen work and good behaviours by encouraging a ‘What's in it for me?’ attitude. And they often benefit children who find school easy rather than those who find getting through the day a superhuman struggle.

The best schools understand that each personal triumph over struggle and adversity is to be recognised, and not always with a public fanfare as not all children enjoy this.

The approaches detailed above get to the heart of my way of thinking – supporting children who have experienced trauma is a matter of education and support, not retribution and punishment.

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# JULES DAULBY

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Jules Daulby is an inclusion and literacy specialist and a national leader for WomenEd, a grassroots organisation supporting women who are, or who aspire to be, in leadership. Originally an English and Drama teacher and formerly director of education for a literacy charity, she now trains and writes on dyslexia, ADHD, parent partnership and assistive technology. Jules has a podcast called The Inclusive Classroom and is co-founder of Transparency on Exclusions (@onexclusions) and a supporter of the #banthebooths campaign.

## Jules Daulby

Inclusion and literacy specialist and a national leader for WomenEd

## You don't see me but I'm here

Half the pupils in any classroom have experienced the kind of trauma that will seriously impact their ability to learn. Often, their teacher will never know the turmoil they are living with.

I have met lots of these pupils, many of whom have lived in care.

A boy who was found to be fending for his family because his mum had fallen prey to drug addiction, was separated from the little sister who had seen him as a father figure. Social services had managed to house both children, but not together.

For one adopted girl, there was a breakthrough when she cried after hurting herself in the playground. She was communicating through tears and screaming, and it was a milestone for her new parents - she had been so neglected, her emotional responses were usually completely passive.

An older student with dyslexia, who was raised in foster care, asked her tutor for help to write an annual letter to her baby sister who had been adopted. Her sister knew nothing about her. The letters were to be opened when she turned 18. Every year, without fail, the student wrote that letter.

A common education mantra is that children need resilience and grit to be successful learners. Care-experienced children have these qualities in spades. And yet the statistics are dire. Disproportionally excluded, low exam grades and very few gaining access to university.

It needn't be like this and teachers could be the key.

In fact, this could be an incredible success story.

In the same way Mandela was able to put aside decades of persecution in order to fight injustice, with the right educational setting, care-experienced children could be inspired to be change makers.

For me, just getting out of bed would be a considerable achievement had I been through the kind of trauma these children face. Listening to the poet Lemn Sissay talk about his awful childhood experiences on Desert Island Discs, it strikes me that his success has been astonishing. But why is this unusual in children who've lived in care?

The advocates of strict schools admire 'steely grit' - which care-experienced children often possess. Yet they are often seen as a problem to be fixed, not as people with a passion to survive which could be channelled for good.

Sometimes the anger, shame and confusion may be too much for a child; some may withdraw and appear silently compliant and others may fight back, not really understanding their own actions but communicating in the only way they feel able.

The way a school responds at this critical time is a sign of their approach to inclusivity. Counsellor or isolation booth? Schools need properly trained staff who are curious about why something went wrong, and a desire to find solutions. The impact of harsh consequences without addressing the causes is damaging and will further marginalise a traumatised child.

For the carers, how schools work with them, recognise their expertise and listen, really listen to their concerns, is vital. Parent partnership is key in creating the right environment. If the child knows that the school and home work in harmony, it will make them feel safer. Conflict allows the cracks to be filled with 'it's happening again'. The worst

possible scenario is to exclude, to reject the young person further and to prove them right, that no-one cares about them. It is why unconditional positive regard has become popular: No matter how hard you try to be rejected, we accept you.

‘What about the other 29? They mustn’t have their education disrupted’. How a community reacts to children who have experienced separation and/or trauma is a marker of a moral society. Teaching other young people who have been brought up in comfortable and safe environments that part of their responsibility is to regard those less fortunate with compassion, is just as important a lesson as a maths equation.

A child’s ecology has school at its centre - a supportive learning environment, working in partnership with their family and liaising with external agencies to ensure chances of success are maximised. It is hard - but it’s the right thing to do. Inclusive schools who do this brilliantly should be rewarded by OFSTED and incentivised by government. Zero-tolerance policies, isolation booths, shaming and parent blame play no part in looking after children who have experienced trauma. It doesn’t work; their anxieties are problematised and punished, with the root causes of their issues remaining unaddressed. They need repair not retribution.

As Lemn Sissay proves, these children can thrive. But with a quarter of prisoners having been in care, and only 6% of care leavers attending university, we are failing children with the fewest resources available to them. Instead, let’s wrap them in compassion and help them to fly. As a society we must see them: They are there.

# PROFESSOR TONY GALLAGHER

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Dean of Research at Queen's University Belfast, Professor Gallagher has pioneered ground-breaking work on the role of education in divided societies, arising from the national trauma experienced in Northern Ireland during decades of conflict and division. This work is now gaining international attention. He is a writer and author, and has published many articles on inclusion, diversity, and the role of schools in supporting children who have experienced conflict.

**Professor Tony Gallagher**

Dean of Research

Northern Ireland suffered a quarter century of political violence until the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. Throughout the years of political violence many had looked to schools to contribute to peace and reconciliation, and to help children and young people deal with the consequences of violence. There was some incredible work done by incredible teachers, but the peace agreement offered an opportunity to take this work forward more effectively and comprehensively.

Throughout the years of violence we faced three limitations in schools. The first was an understandable desire to see schools as 'safe havens' where the chaos of society was left at the door. The second problem was a perceived lack of support for teachers, meaning that many teachers were reluctant to address these issues. The third was the fact that Northern Ireland had a school system that was largely divided on religious grounds, with parallel systems for Protestants and Catholics. This meant that even in schools committed to address these issues, the voice of the 'other' in our divided society was not present.

The overall consequence was that the consequences of our divisions were shrouded in a blanket of silence. There was a long-standing tradition of 'silence' on these issues throughout society, in large part as a coping mechanism: difficult issues were left unexplored, anger and hurt was left unexpressed, traumatic experiences were left unspoken. The teachers who were brave enough, and confident enough, to address these issues had identified good methods and pedagogies, but this was not a priority of our education system.

The peace agreement provided an opportunity to take this work to a higher level, and work with schools and teachers to underpin the peace process we had begun to enjoy. One important initiative that developed was work on Shared Education which sought to establish locally-based collaborative networks of Protestant and Catholic schools so that children and young people could take classes in each other's schools, and teachers from different schools could work together to improve the educational experience of all their pupils.

From modest beginnings in 2007, and significant funding support from the Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland, we have now got to a place where over half of all schools in Northern Ireland are involved in some form of collaborative partnership and tens of thousands of pupils participate in shared classes. The approach has been adopted in Israel, with shared education initiatives between Jewish and Arab schools; in Macedonia, between Macedonian and Albanian communities; in Los Angeles, between charter and public schools; and is being actively explored in other parts of the Balkans and Lebanon.

In all of these places children, young people, parents and teachers are finding new opportunities to meet, and talk, and listen, and the silence which often envelopes controversial issues is beginning to unfold. The new context of sharing and collaboration is seeking to replace relationships of fear with relationships of trust; it is encouraging engagement in real processes of dialogue where people not only have the right to be heard, but the responsibility to listen; and it is creating conditions of confidence and safety that allow the previously unsaid to be said.

For teachers the value of engaging with colleagues from other schools, other communities and other traditions, is palpable. In order to support the work in Northern Ireland we have encouraged opportunities for teacher exchanges with teachers in Israel, Los Angeles and the Balkans. During one of these exchanges a Northern Irish teacher learned about a new technique for identifying the effects of trauma on a student based on a constellation of behaviours. This approach was being used with success in Los Angeles schools and as she heard it explained the image of some pupils in her own school back home immediately came to mind. Upon her return she sought out

additional advice and put in place a support package for a couple of her pupils whose circumstances had previously been under-appreciated and misunderstood.

This is perhaps the greatest value of sharing and collaboration: by making institutional boundaries porous, we engage with a wider pool of experiences, expertise and traditions. Our taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged, and new possibilities for innovation and creativity emerge. In such a context, barriers stop being fixed impediments and become problems which can be solved. It can produce educational environments which are not only better informed, but better connected and more trustful. In Northern Ireland these shared classrooms are providing us with spaces to engage better with the challenges of our divided society, not least because there is better support for our teachers to do exactly that. There is, of course, a considerable distance to be travelled, but the step-change we had hoped for has been achieved, and we can look to the future with more optimism and a stronger measure of hope.

*Martine Mulhern, Head Teacher of St Cecilia's College in Derry, remembers her exchange visit to Los Angeles two years ago as a light bulb moment. There, she was introduced to the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences, and the connection with the children in her own school was very clear.*

*Over 60% of the children at St Cecilia's are on free school meals, in a community that bore the brunt of Northern Ireland's decades of conflict. Martine describes the "generational trauma" she sees, with students exposed to drugs, domestic violence, poverty and a recent increase in community violence. Despite this, attainment is well above the national average.*

*After the Los Angeles exchange, Martine and other staff attended an Adoption UK 'Let's Learn Together' workshop which helped explain why, for some children, the usual strategies just don't seem to work.*

*At St Cecilia's, children who need extra support now have a "safe hands" team around them, with multi-disciplinary meetings with social workers and other professionals. The school has a designated teacher to work with students 1-1, access to equine therapy, and a safe base.*

*Martine believes that some of her students are literally still alive today because of the support they have received from St Cecilia's and their partners.*



# NICKY MURRAY

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**Nicky Murray**  
Headmaster

Burnside Primary School in Carnoustie has become a leading light in Scotland's ACE-aware movement. Head teacher Nicky Murray has spear-headed a transformation at the school that has seen increased parental involvement, the development of extensive partnerships with the local community and professional organisations, and a wholesale reform of the school's aims, policies and ethos. Burnside's latest inspection report (June 2018) described the school's Leadership of Change and Ensuring Wellbeing, Quality and Inclusion as 'sector leading', noting that children were 'calm and engaged purposefully in learning at all times.'

Nicky Murray's ten ingredients for a great school for children who have experienced trauma are all drawn from initiatives at Burnside that have proven to be successful in practice without compromising the quality of education for all children.

1. An excellent school starts from where the child is.
2. Relationships between adults and children are built on choice, empowerment, safety and trust.
3. The school has wellbeing for all as a core value, and all learning is linked to children's wellbeing. Each day children are provided with opportunities to participate in class discussions linked to their understanding of wellbeing.
4. Curriculum around the impact of trauma is developed. This curriculum is modelled and delivered consistently at every opportunity and the school is primed to make every interaction count in providing cumulative therapeutic doses across the school day.
5. Staff are well supported when responding to trauma. There is time for extensive professional dialogue.
6. Children are supported to explore ways to regulate their own behaviour in a place of safety, understanding and with compassion. Children are actively encouraged to choose regulation strategies that work for them and are empowered to use the strategies across the day whenever necessary. Adults working in the school recognise the different ways in which trauma can affect people, and understand their role is to buffer and co regulate with children.
7. Unconditional positive regard is a practice feature across the school and extreme care and consideration is shown to all children, adults and families within that setting. Behaviour is seen as communication. A shared language of learning is developed, with use of scripts and key phrases used at home and in school, to be modelled when children experience hyper arousal or overactive stress response.
8. A sense of agency is promoted throughout every classroom. The school prioritises learner agency and recognises learners' individuality. Each class context considers the wider set of relationships that can also influence children's learning, in and out of school.
9. Transitions and separations are important. An excellent school will draw attention to the many opportunities for connection at these times. For example, staff greeting parents, carers and children even before they enter the school premises to affirm how important relationships are to the school community. Or parents being asked to put their electronic devices away at point of drop off and collection to support children to regulate with a cuddle and good eye contact.
10. Projects are promoted to ameliorate stress, including the creation of clothing banks, food banks, drop ins, parenting surgeries and support groups.

# DR ELIZABETH GREGORY



Dr Gregory is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist with over twenty years' experience working with Child and Family services in the NHS in Wales.

Dr Elizabeth Gregory  
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Having experienced Canadian schools with my own children, I know that many of our inherent assumptions about how education needs to be are simply not true. When I returned from 3 years in Toronto it dawned on me that I had never once talked to parents about exam results. And voluntary work was considered as important as any academic subject. My son summed up the difference between the UK and Canadian education system perfectly: "In the UK it's all about being the best but in Toronto it was all about doing your best". And yet Canada beats the UK hands down on the international Pisa league tables for academic excellence.

One crucial factor in the success of the Canadian education system is the emphasis placed on creating a sense of safety and belonging. In primary schools it is much easier, and already many British primaries are a warm, happy place where children thrive.

In secondary education the task is much harder, and it is in this transition that many of our most vulnerable children lose their way. Secondary schools have a specific job to do. The piece of paper that a young person leaves their gates with at the end of year 11 is the measure by which they are judged. Their *modus operandi* is competition – top set, student of the term, inter-form netball, most money collected for charity, prizes for the best results, the best sportsperson, the best musician...kids are pitted against each other and there are winners and losers at every turn.

Some children thrive in this environment. Others survive, keeping their head just above water. Others fail miserably, and school is experienced as somewhere where they are never good enough.

So what is the solution? How can we weave emotional well-being and self-belief into the fabric of the school when so many of the practices and internal and external pressures work against this? We should, of course, look at the growing knowledge that is amassing about child development, and what children need to thrive, and design an education system around this. But that would pose a huge challenge to the status quo because it would mean starting from scratch.

So let's start with the strengths of the current UK system and build on that. Emotional well-being is all about relationships, and the 'form' system lends itself beautifully to nurturing this. Children start secondary school in one form, and usually remain in that form for the next five years, often with the same form tutor. In some schools they have mixed year group forms, and in my opinion this is even better. The youngest in the school join an established form. They can look up to their role models and become those role models of the future. And learning can go in all directions, with younger children gaining confidence and realising they have something to offer too.

The Head at the High School my son attended in Canada said at a welcome evening 'We get them through the door in the morning with something they love, then it is our job to keep them interested in the subjects that may have less appeal'. If the form tutor were to ask the class how to make registration as much fun as possible what would they say? Music? Dancing? Rounders? Joke telling? Board games? Thirty kids generating as many ideas as possible and each having a turn to give theirs a go would be one way of starting the morning on a high.

If we were to go a step further, and make fun AND well-being the focus of those first twenty five minutes of the day how might that look? Monday could be connection day – especially important for children who have had a difficult weekend. How could they welcome each other and create a sense of belonging and 'family' to start their week? What might become their unique rituals and traditions? Tuesday could be giving day – what is the form's chosen cause? They could give their time, their skills, or raise money or simply give to each other. Compliments go a long

way to getting your day off to a good start. Wednesday could be about getting active – to tackle that mid-week slump. A brisk walk? Stretching? Dancing? Simon Says? Body popping? The ideas would need to come from them of course. Thursday could be taking notice – there are lots of great mindfulness exercises as well as an opportunity to reflect on how they are in the moment – noticing their feelings and, over time, practicing expressing them in a safe and supportive way. And Friday would be learn a new skill day – now that could be really fun. Bagpipes? Slime making?

If this was working well, every young person would think their form was the ‘best’. Now that would be worth getting out of bed for.

# CONCLUSION

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The experiences and knowledge of experts such as those featured in this report, education professionals across the UK, and parents and carers of traumatised children, demonstrate that there is a different way: a way that not only provides an equal chance for children who have not had an equal start in life, but which can provide a foundation for excellence for every child that comes into our classrooms.

The foundations of this approach are devastatingly simple:

- Prioritise safety and a sense of belonging for vulnerable children
- Invest in collaboration between all those involved in the care, education and welfare of children
- Provide quality training opportunities and robust ongoing support and resourcing for teaching staff

The Secretary of State for Education in England, Damien Hinds MP, has stated that, “When kids are happy, settled and in good health, that puts them in a much better position for everything else in school.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this rhetoric, the value placed on academic results means that schools have little incentive to give teachers the funds, time, training and resources to support the wellbeing, emotional development and mental health of all children.

Though the solutions are often simple and affordable, they often require wholesale reform of school policies, from foundational principles upwards. For school leaders working in the current education environment, this takes huge courage.

Many schools around the UK are already embarking on this journey. The education systems in Scotland and Wales are embedding it into their foundational principles. It remains to be seen whether governments, inspection regimes and school leaders across the UK have the courage to follow their lead.

# ADOPTION UK RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Ensure that inspection frameworks across the UK hold schools to account for the way they support their most vulnerable students. School inspection bodies\* should insist that no school is outstanding unless it is outstanding for all.
- Introduce initial teacher training modules and a programme of affordable continuing professional development for all education professionals specifically tailored to supporting students who have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences;
- Support schools to prioritise social and emotional wellbeing and literacy, giving staff and students the time and space to develop meaningful relationships;
- End the postcode lottery to ensure that there is parity of funding and provision of specialist support regardless of where in the UK children attend school;
- Lay the foundations for education reform for previously looked after children by collecting and analysing educational outcomes data for this cohort.

\* OFSTED in England, ESTYN in Wales, Education Scotland in Scotland, and The Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland

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